

A Sermon for Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C
March 18, 2007
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Good morning. Today's Gospel, commonly known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son, is one of the best known and most beloved passages in all of the scriptures. It's been called the "paragon of the parables." It's not hard to figure out that the Father in this parable is God; indeed, one commentator has noted that "no other image has come closer to describing the character of God." This is truly a great story – every time you hear it you seem to understand something more about God's love.

I wish that we had big screens here at St. Luke's like they have at several of the churches I visited last Autumn, because I would love to show the scene from "Jesus of Nazareth" in which Jesus tells the story. Peter is angry at Jesus for accepting an invitation to dine with Matthew, whom Peter hates because he is a tax collector. Peter tries to sleep, but when he hears the noise of the festivities in Matthew's courtyard, Peter goes in to see what is happening. When Jesus notices that Peter is present, listening with Matthew and his guests, he tells the parable.

In the Gospel of Luke, of course, this is the third of three parables Jesus tells the Pharisees when they complain that he welcomes sinners and eats with them. The first two parables - the lost sheep and the lost coin – both end with the promise of rejoicing, but this parable ends with the party to end all parties: the best clothes are brought out, the fancy jewelry is put on, and the fatted calf is killed for prime steaks.

But wait just a minute, I hear you say. Isn't this Lent? Aren't we four weeks into the season of deprivation, remorse, penitence and guilt? So what are we doing, reading about the party to end all parties? And this isn't just a fluke; the readings for this morning came from a source no less august than the Lectionary in the Book of Common Prayer. So, assuming that the authors of the prayer book knew what they were doing, just what exactly is the Parable of the Prodigal Son doing here as the Gospel reading during Lent?

Perhaps the answer might be found in the parable itself. After all, the story's not that complicated: it starts with a younger brother demands his inheritance, he then squanders it, and eventually decides that he's made a mistake and could do better as one of his father's hired hands. The younger son decides to apologize, and he even *rehearses* his apology. I have no doubt that people are listening to sermons this morning analyzing the Prodigal Son's apology as the model for confessional prayer: an address, "Father"; confession, "I have sinned"; contrition, "I am no longer worthy"; and a petition, "treat me like one of your hired hands." That's a good pattern for confessional prayer; in fact, it's the model of *our* Prayer of Confession.

Now if we stopped reading right there, you could all be enduring a sermon about the need for a true spirit of contrition during Lent. But the parable continues: "So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran to him and put his arms around him and kissed him" (v. 20). In ancient Palestine, it was considered a loss of dignity for a grown man to run, yet that's precisely what the boy's father did

,and – this is crucial – before the son ever got the chance to give his carefully crafted apology speech. Before he even muttered a word, the son was forgiven.

So am I advocating here that we cut out the prayer of confession and the absolution? Well, even though it would make worship briefer, I'm not here to abridge our worship. Remember: the son *came to himself*, realized that he had blown it, realized that there was nothing he could do to set things right. From that perspective the son learned that he was already forgiven. All *real* confession is subsequent to forgiveness, and every confession, whether public as we'll all do in just a few minutes or private, is witness to that. Every confession we make as a community, every time we pray "Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed," is *subsequent* to the one sacrament which wipes out for all times our sins: our baptism.

But we forget the waters of our baptism and pretend that we can handle everything without God. So when we – like the Prodigal Son – "come to ourselves" – and realize that we can't rely on ourselves, that all of our attempts to solve our problems have been disasters of Biblical proportions, then we don't need to compound our felony by going through an elaborate ritual of formal penitence. We don't apologize to God, we *confess*; and what we confess is that without God we are nothing, on our own we are not worthy to be his son. And the God who has been watching and waiting runs to us, takes us in his arms, and replies, look around you: you've been baptized, you're immersed in a sea of grace, so stop trying to swim and float. This might be why the peace is right after the absolution: it is a visible manifestation of that grace, a preview of the Kingdom of God.

And I think that this is something we already know, since we proclaim it every time we pray "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive the trespasses of others" as part of the Lord's Prayer. Now, I have read that few things cause as much sheer terror for Christians than that little word "as," but I'm here to tell you after seven intensive months of Biblical Greek that there might be another way to understand that part of the Lord's Prayer. The little word translated as "as" in "as we forgive" can also mean "that" or even "how." In other words, forgive us our sins *that* we forgive others: we forgive others not to earn God's forgiveness, as if we ever could, but because God has forgiven us. And *our* forgiveness should reflect *God's* forgiveness of us: not a temporary stopgap until something else happens, but as God removes our sins, in the words of the Psalmist, "as far as the east is from the west" (Ps. 103:12). The word "forgive" in the Lord's Prayer is in the Greek perfect tense, indicating a past action which has a continuing effect in the present. In other words, we should forgive others just as God forgives us at our baptism. We should live as if we never dried off after our baptism.

So if somebody says either "you owe me an apology" or "I may forgive, but I never forget," well, that sad person knows neither the scriptures nor the power of God. The scriptures bear witness to God's reconciling forgiveness, and the power of God in our lives confirms that witness. Forgiveness is at the very heart of God. And we need to tread carefully here when we talk about the heart of God because, like Moses when he saw the burning bush on Mount Horeb, we are stepping on holy ground. Forgiveness is more than a response, or even an emotion,

forgiveness is the power of grace. And when we tap into that power – when we forgive others as God has forgiven us – our forgiveness has the same result as God’s forgiveness: when we forgive, we transform the world.

On the night after September 11, 2001, we gathered as a community to pray for those killed and wounded by the terrorist attacks on our country, and to try to make some sense of what had happened. People were confused, scared and hurt. Yet through those fears and concerns, the people of this parish prayed one prayer which I believe expresses the power of forgiveness: “O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us; remember the fruits we have bought, thanks to this suffering – our comradeship, our loyalty, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this, and when they come to judgment let all the fruits we have borne be their redemption.” It was written by an unknown prisoner at Ravensbruck concentration camp and left by the body of a dead child.

I mentioned that I really would like to have a couple of big screens so we could watch the scene from “Jesus of Nazareth” telling the Parable of the Prodigal Son. My reason, though, is not to see the scene as it might have been, but to watch the result of the parable. When Jesus says “this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and had been found,” he looks straight at Peter, who had chided Jesus for eating with Matthew, the tax collector. Peter replies in tears, “forgive me, master,” and Jesus tenderly takes Peter and leads him to embrace Matthew. And that, Jesus forgiving each one of us and leading us to forgive others, is the Kingdom of God. Amen.